

Ben Shahn





Perhaps it is presumptuous for an artist to make predictions as to the future of art. I believe that its course will be determined by the moods of society, by political situations, by kinds of patronage, and so on. If art must evolve about an elite, it may become increasingly abstruse... although that's merely a guess. We have witnessed the banalities that the totalitarian condition produces. And there is no tangible evidence that Democracy will necessarily yield a good art. What then can be said to be a favorable condition for art?

Looking backward, one might observe that the surpassingly beautiful art of the past has emerged from those periods when man was deeply stirred spiritually, or by great ideas that were true of the golden age of Greece, whose intellectual and emotional concepts we still own. Again, during the Renaissance, artists and poets were captured by the refinements of religious devotion. We carry its images about with us now, and are the better for it.

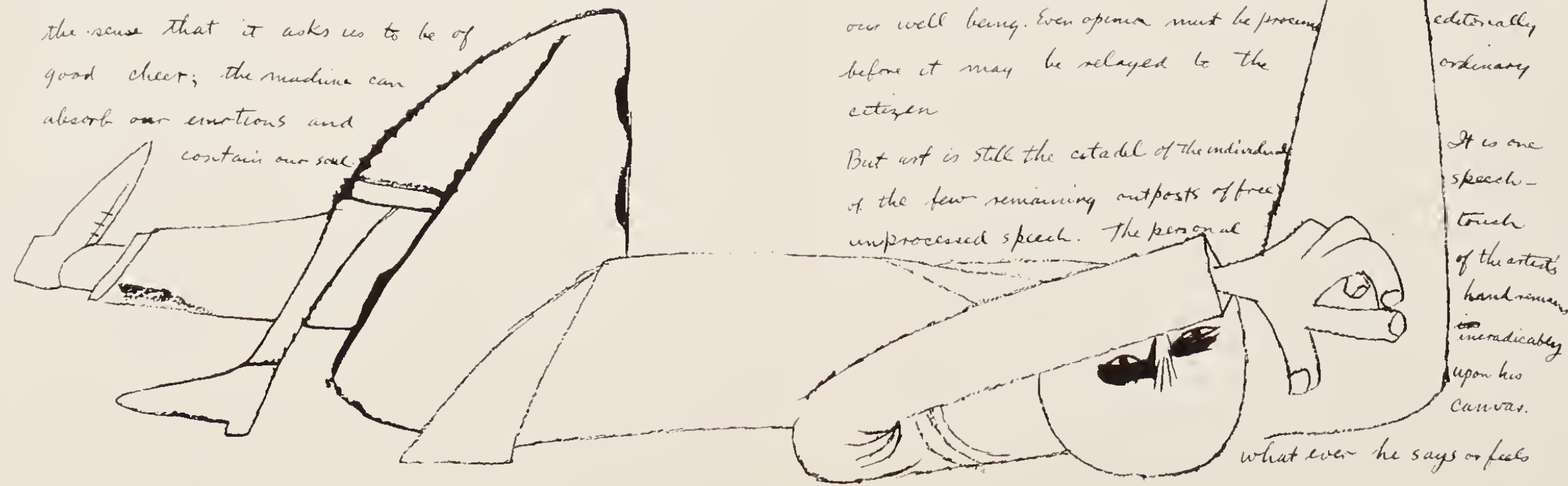
The last half of the nineteenth century in France - in all of Europe - saw the rise of the free and sovereign individual. His humanness and was his paramount quality; and that included his moralities and immoralities, his inner vision and his outer grossness, all of which were celebrated in the arts of the time. What ever pretensions to cosmic authority may

have been made by the art of the "icons", it succeeded only in being more human.

I doubt that what now seems to be an atomic age, or is in any case a scientific-mechanical age, will ever be greatly distinguished for its contribution to the human spirit.

But perhaps later generations, if there are to be later generations, will discover in it qualities which the near view prevents one's seeing.

It is claimed that non-objective art is the perfect expression of such an age, and perhaps that is true. For the non-objective painting claims validity only for its mechanics; for the material with which it is made; and the manner of their organization. It rejects man, his life, his visions, his philosophies, his future. It is even affirmative in the sense that it asks us to be of good cheer; the machine can absorb our emotions and

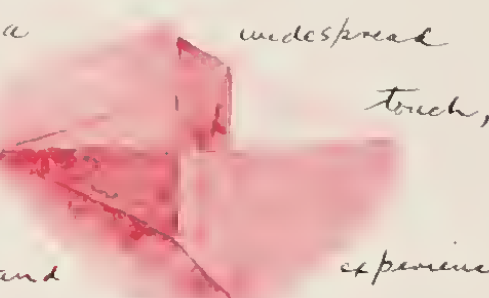


contain our soul.

Still, I believe that the increasing interest and activity in art is in essence a rebellion against the absolutism of science and mechanics; that it evidences a widespread nostalgia for the human touch, and for the personal statement.

For so much that we live with and experience today has become devoid of personality. Objects that we handle and use are mass-produced, our clothing mass-designed. Our entertainment, in great part, must needs be reduced to common denominators and clichés. Communication has stereotyped public action, and with that the personal truth and truth telling that we have held so dear to our well being. Even opinion must be processed before it may be relayed to the citizen.

But art is still the citadel of the individual, of the few remaining outposts of free, unprocessed speech. The personal



mass-information-gathering, essential to editorially ordinary. It is one speech-touch of the artist's hand, inextricably upon his canvas.

what ever he says or feels

is communicated directly and without modification to those who look at his work.

But I think that artists ought to recognize this, that there is no moral reason why art ought to go on if it has nothing further to express. Nor is there any moral or aesthetic reason why the public ought to bend the knee in reverence before the mere fact of art. We might assume that art is important only if it essays to be important.

If it adopts the manner and outlook and philosophy of a minor expression, then a minor expression it will be. If it aspires to aim to an aesthetic of double talk, just that will be its portion, nothing more, and life itself will walk around it and let it alone.

Society needs more than anything else to be reminded that man is, in himself, ultimate value. It needs to be reminded that neither the pressure of events nor the exigencies of diplomacy can warrant the final debasement of man. We need a resurgence of the humanities, a rebirth of spirit. Art, because it is the minute expression of man, speaks also in final values, tends to reaffirm the individual. Art is neither use, nor appointed task; but given human compulsion, some intellectual stature and great competence, it can perhaps bring man back into focus as being of supreme importance. In which case it will have earned an honored place among the humanities.

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	CONTAINER CORP. OF AMERICA
	INLAND STEEL COMPANY
Des Moines, Iowa	DES MOINES ART CENTER
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	MUSEUM OF MODERN ART
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Wichita, Kansas	BUTLER ART INSTITUTE
Youngstown, Ohio	

MURALS: Community Building, Roosevelt, N.J., 1938-9
Bronx Post Office, N.Y. (with Bernarda Bryson), 1938-9
Jamaica Post Office, Long Island, N.Y., 1939
Social Security Building, Washington, D.C., 1940-42
Grady High School, Brooklyn, N.Y. (Mosaic), 1957

BEN SHAHN EXHIBITION

AT THE

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MARCH 3 TO 28, 1959

1	After Titian	Tempera	1959
2	Lute and Molecules	Gouache	1958
3	Parable	Tempera	1958
	Collection Munson-Williams-Proctor Institute		
4	Poem of Ecstasy	Tempera	1958
5	Conversation	Watercolor	1958
	Collection Whitney Museum of American Art		
6	Helix and Crystal	Tempera	1957
	Collection Mr. Joseph Strick		
7	Still Life	Watercolor	1957
	Collection Mr. Adolph Green		
8	Cosmos	Watercolor	1957
	Collection Mr. and Mrs. Jacob Kaplan		
9	Third Alphabet	Drawing	1957
	Collection Mr. and Mrs. Walter Werner		
10	When the Saints . . .	Tempera	1956
	Collection Mr. and Mrs. Fred Friendly		
11	Folk Song	Watercolor	1956
	Collection Mr. Armand Erpf		
12	Apotheosis	Watercolor	1956
	Collection Mr. and Mrs. Jacob Schulman		
13	Maimonides	Drawing	1956
14	Frenzied Drums (Armstrong Series)	Drawing	1956
15	Dream	Tempera	1955
	Collection Mrs. Yoland Markson		
16	Chicago	Watercolor	1955
	Collection Dr. Michael Watter		
17	From the Marriage of Heaven and Hell	Watercolor	1955
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18	Wheat	Drawing	1955
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